DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 443 CS 212 884

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TITLE Literary Reading and Classroom Constraints: Aligning Practice with Theory. Report Series 5.2.
INSTITUTION Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, Albany, NY.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 90
CONTRACT G008720278
NOTE 29p.
AVAILABLE FROM Literature Center, University at Albany Ed B-9, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12222.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Elementary Secondary Education; Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; *Small Group Instruction; Student Behavior; Teacher Behavior; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Aesthetic Reading

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reorientation of classroom practices in the teaching of literature, a reorientation proceeding from new understandings of literary reading. The first section of the paper reviews convergences in current theory and research on literary reading that teachers ought to consider when rethinking classroom practice. The second section of the paper, on reader response theory, considers to what extent current classroom situations and practices in the teaching of literature are hospitable to the new understanding of literary reading. The third section of the paper suggests and demonstrates how classroom situations and practices might be more properly aligned with what is known about acts of reading literature. The fourth section of the paper points up some of the key issues teachers ought to consider in developing agendas for reader-centered classrooms. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (RS)

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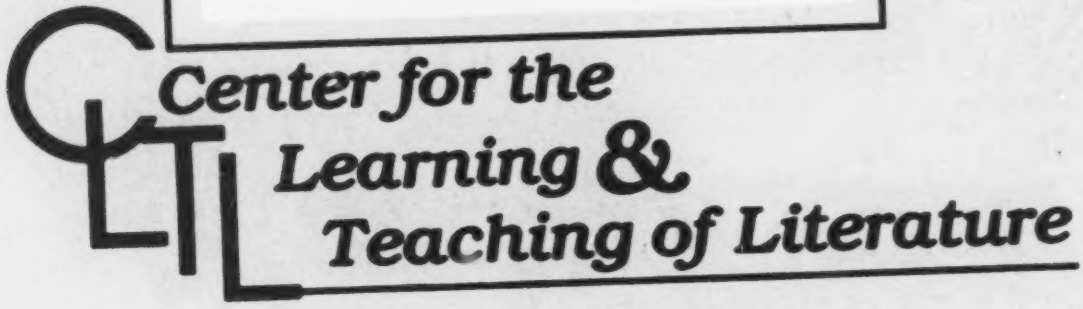
Patrick Dias



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1990

Preparation of this report was supported in part by grant number G008720278, which is cosponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI/ED), and by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OERI/ED or NEA, and no official endorsement of either agency should be inferred.

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Literary Reading and Classroom Constraints: Aligning Practice with Theory

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Over the past two decades, theory and research in the fields of reading and reader response have converged toward some central understandings with respect to what occurs in literary reading, that is, what occurs in the transactions between readers and literary texts. Mike Hayhoe and I have argued elsewhere at some length (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988) that such understandings are remarkably consistent with developments in literary critical theory, accommodating as well some of the basic and less flamboyant arguments in post-structuralist literary criticism. At the core of these developments is the view of the reader as actively engaged in making meaning and of meaning as residing neither in the reader nor in the text, but constantly renewed in the transactions that occur between reader and text. A strong purveyor of such a position has been Louise Rosenblatt, who introduced such notions in 1938 and developed them more fully in 1978. It is only recently that several related fields of inquiry have converged to confirm the theoretical and practical validity of her views.

This chapter proposes a reorientation of classroom practices in the teaching of literature, a reorientation proceeding from these new understandings of literary reading. The argument for such a reorientation falls into four sections. The first section, "Literary Reading: New Understandings," reviews those particular convergences in current theory and research on literary reading that teachers ought to consider when rethinking classroom practice. The second section, "Reader Response Theory and the Teaching of Literature," considers to what extent current classroom situations and practices in the teaching of literature are hospitable to our new understandings of literary reading. The third section, "Response-centered Practice: Overcoming Classroom Constraints," suggests how classroom situations and practices might be more properly aligned with what we know about acts of reading literature. The fourth and closing section points up some of the key issues teachers ought to consider in developing agendas for reader-centered classrooms.

The Literary Transaction

Transaction is the term used by Rosenblatt (1978) to represent the nature of the literary experience. The term implies that a literary work is essentially an event in time, "an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" (pp. 20-21); it is not an entity existing apart from a reader and the particular occasion of its reading. Each act of reading a particular literary text is a recreation of that work; as Terry Eagleton suggests, one never really reads the same poem twice (1983). Thus the "poem" in the title of Rosenblatt's The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978) exists neither in the reader nor in the text, but in the transaction between reader and text.

Such a view of literary reading represents a current concern in critical thought. Other movements have seen the 'poem', on the one hand, as an autonomous object, an entity residing largely or entirely in the text, apart from the contexts of its creation or its readers - views expressed by New Critics such as Brooks (1947), Wellek and Warren (1949), and Wimsatt (1958).

On the other hand, in reaction to such a position, a subjectivist view has been advanced by critics such as Holland (1973, 1975) and Bleich (1975, 1978) who argue, in the words of Bleich, "that reading is a wholly subjective process and that the nature of what is perceived is determined by the rules of the personality of the perceiver" (1975, p. 3). The view of Rosenblatt and like-minded critics, including current post-structuralist critics, is not necessarily a compromise between these two rather deterministic positions; rather, it takes account of the reading situation, the continually altering contexts that should affect how and what one reads, and the consequent instability of meaning. Quite obviously, reading a story to answer some comprehension questions set by a teacher is not the same as reading for one's own pleasure or to search for occurrences of a particular word or image.

The importance of the reader's stance in determining how and what one reads is illustrated by Rosenblatt's notions of aesthetic and efferent reading:

> In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading - the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out. ....
>
> As the reader responds to the printed words or symbols, his attention is directed outward, so to speak, toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading.
>
> To designate this type of reading, in which the primary concern of the reader is with what he will carry away from the reading, I have chosen the term "efferent," derived from the Latin "efferre," "to carry away." ....
>
> In aesthetic reading, in contrast, the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event. Though, like the efferent reader of a law text, say, the reader of Frost's "Birches" must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, he also pays attention to associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. "Listening to" himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. *In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.* (1978, pp. 23-25)

If we are considering then how best we might align classroom practice with current understandings of the act of reading, we need to begin by asking to what extent and how classroom contexts predetermine an efferent stance on the part of readers.

The Literary Work

The literary text is often defined as a blueprint (Iser, 1978), a potentiality of meaning to be activated or realized by the reader. One of the more productive aspects of post-structuralist criticism is that it regards literary text as a dynamic entity and welcomes considerations of alternative meanings; a dwelling in uncertainty rather than an effort to close in on the one right meaning. Literary texts afford possibilities of meaning rather than merely concealing meanings that can only be realized by close analysis. Such notions of the literary text and of meaning as unstable are congruent with a view of literary reading as a transaction. At the same time, such

a view of literary reading *does not* accommodate a position that a literary work means whatever one wants it to mean. The reader must work within the constraints imposed by the lexical, semantic, and formal components of the text. This brings into question the roles of teachers as authorized readers, as those who mediate between canonized texts and apprentice readers, and how they can guide their students to become skilled meaning-makers.

The Reader's Role

When literary reading is considered transactional, readers are viewed as active performers of text rather than as passive receivers. Such activity goes much beyond decoding meaning; it involves ascribing intentions, considering analogical situations, attending to the feelings and associations called up during the reading, including memories of other texts. It is an act of analysis as well as an act of composing, of 'writing' the text. And like writing, it is recursive; that is, it has both a forward and backward movement, and does not necessarily proceed serially.

Individual Strategies in Reading Literature

Given the individuality of readers and their active involvement in the making of meaning, it should not be surprising that readers differ in their strategies for making sense of literature. Readers are particularly individualistic in their past histories as readers, in how they believe they must proceed in making sense of literature. I have observed in a small number of cases that those readers who have grown used to reading in order to answer quizzes on their reading are often quite easily put off reading long fiction, simply because they have learned to become more attentive to minor details at the expense of the larger events and themes in the story. In my own research on how adolescent readers go about making sense of poetry (Dias 1987), I have noticed patterns of reading that reflect classroom practices. There are readers who read a poem only to paraphrase it, simply because they have somehow internalized the notion that their task as readers is to translate the complex language of poetry into simple prose. There are other readers who see their task as puzzling out the theme of the poem and announcing from time to time in their reading a generalization (about nature or mankind, for instance), in the hope that they will somehow hit the mark. This notion of the poem as a puzzle is engendered in the ways questions are asked and answers entertained in some classrooms. Without opportunities for pupils to reflect and analyze before answering, a trial and error strategy seems about the most practical strategy they can adopt.

There are other patterns of reading, but these two examples should suffice to make my point: readers' strategies more often than not develop from classroom practices. Instructional activities make some strategies more productive than others. Readers' expectations as to what they must read for are powerful determiners of how they will approach other texts in the same genre. Reading in the expectation that one's comprehension will be tested by the teacher is unlikely to promote either enjoyment of reading or the likelihood that an individual will voluntarily read such texts in the future.

Reader Response Theory and the Teaching of Literature

If we agree that one of our main aims in the teaching of literature is the development of autonomous readers, readers who work from their own responses yet are open to newer possibilities of meaning, we need to ask to what extent such an aim is realizable within the situations that prevail in most English classrooms. There are several aspects of typical classroom practice that work against the development of autonomous readers and subvert the processes that support aesthetic reading, cultivating instead reading that is largely efferent.

The Literary Work as an Event in Time

The typical relationship between teacher and taught is inconsistent with the notion of reading as transaction where meaning is continually recreated in each act of meaning, particularly where the teacher functions as guide to and arbiter of meaning. Moreover, the organization of reading and discussion in set blocks of time assumes that all readers can be expected to realize the literary work in the same way and at the same pace. There is little time for reflection and reversal and too urgent a demand for the immediate right answer. Part of the difficulty is, of course, the fact that the teacher is not usually an equal partner in the conversation, having read the work several times and more often than not, being armed with an arsenal of questions. Such a situation can only lead to students' believing that the correct version of the work is locked in the mind of the teacher and that it is their job to ferret it out - most likely by attending to the signals the teacher transmits.

As teachers, we are often unaware of the extent to which our authority directs and eventually subverts student inquiry. A project involving a group of 16-year-olds who met informally with their teachers once a week after school in reading discussion groups serves as an example. The teachers understood, as a condition of their involvement in the project, that they would not function as authority figures, but participate with their students as curious and equal readers. At a meeting with the groups towards the end of the year, I asked the students whether their teachers behaved any differently during the discussion sessions from how they functioned in the regular classroom format. After the students agreed that they felt much more comfortable within the discussion format, they hesitantly went on to point out some important differences. If and when the teachers asked questions in the discussion sessions, the students felt their opinions were genuinely sought, quite unlike how they felt when these teachers asked questions in the regular classroom. The questions during the discussion sessions were real inquiries, the teachers wished to be informed, and the students were sure there were no correct answers against which they were being measured. That the questions were genuine was easily apparent in the fact that the teachers were not impatient for answers, providing time for everyone to reflect and reconsider. By contrast, in the regular classrooms, the teachers hardly paused to allow for reflection; students were expected to have ready-made answers. If they did not answer or, more likely, guess correctly, they were provided the teachers' versions.

Overall, however, the students were unanimous in supporting their teachers' restrictive approaches in their regular classroom. They felt: (1) the teachers could not afford the leisurely pace that was allowed in the discussion sessions - they had a program to cover; (2) the students had to be prepared for examinations and for what was expected of them in post-secondary studies, and certainly, however much they enjoyed it, informal discussion was impractical preparation for such a world. In a sense, the students had accepted arguments that justified a

particular kind of teaching, even if they wondered what they were really learning.

Typical classroom settings also promote the notion that somehow class sessions must move towards consensus on central issues raised by the set reading. Students are not expected or even encouraged to differ with each other, or to entertain ambiguity. It is not expected that some issues will resolve themselves only over time, will raise new questions, will emerge anew in other readings. It is accepted that tests and examinations demand definitive, final answers. One can defend and account for the popularity of crib notes, like Coles' or Cliffs notes, simply on the basis that such notes, unchanged it seems for years, provide *the* answers, and, of course, perpetuate a belief that the answers as well as the questions will always be the same. If literary reading is truly an event in time, we must find ways of consistently demonstrating this belief in practice.

The Literary Work as "Evoked"

Rosenblatt uses the term "evocation" to refer to "the lived-through process of building up the work under the guidance of the text" (1978, p. 69). She distinguishes between the reader's evocation of a poem and that reader's interpretation of that evocation. I have argued above that the typical classroom allows little time for a developing response, and by that I mean little time for the reader's evocation of a literary work, what Rosenblatt has also described as the "lived-through current of ideas, sensations, images, tensions ..." (1985, 103), as well as the response to that evocation, which develops, if called for, into interpretation as well. The point to keep in mind is that the large group format with the teacher up front is inhospitable to those deeply personal engagements, the recalling of personal experience, that the term 'evocation' implies. Those evocations need to be worked out, filtered through within the supportive confines of a small group rather than held back and denied within the large group. In interviews with adolescent readers, I was particularly aware of some students who felt (and demonstrated by their failure to call on them) that their personal experiences were largely irrelevant to their understanding of a literary work and its discussion in the classroom. Even where students had been asked to keep reading logs, it was rare that teachers had legitimized the value of personal experiences either by specific instruction or by commenting favorably on what they had written in their logs.

Readers' Expectations

Readers' expectations are powerful determiners of how and what they understand of literary text. The expectation that a text will not make sense is quite likely to ensure that it doesn't. Such expectations seem to disengage one's sense-making efforts, efforts which would normally work around the difficulties of the text, unfamiliar vocabulary, etc. For instance, I do not expect to understand the fine print in my insurance policy and therefore do not put forth the effort which would allow me to make even minimal sense of - and later, with growing familiarization, develop some degree of competence in the reading of - such texts. Expectations regarding literary text are engendered largely in the classroom from previous encounters with literature. Too large a proportion of students believe, for instance, that they cannot make sense of a poem on their own. Such an expectation could easily have grown from the classroom practice of teachers asking questions about poems before their students have had sufficient time to attend to and recognize what the poem has evoked in them. Over ten years ago, I asked

eighty English teachers how many readings of a poem they allowed for before they asked their students the first question on that poem. The mean number of readings turned out to be 1.6. Whatever the nature of that first question, such a practice transmits a message that students should have with one or two readings come to some understanding of the poem. Because students quite obviously can't, they must conclude that they are not really capable of understanding poetry on their own. Teachers - at all levels - ought to remind themselves how often they themselves read a poem before they decide to use it in their classroom; they should also recall how uncertain they might have felt in their first encounters with that poem.

Another expectation generated by classroom practice is the notion of literary text as a static entity. Such a notion is particularly apparent in some teachers' efforts to wrap up and put the final seal on the literary work. It is apparent as well in some hierarchical sequences of questioning that point to a predestined conclusion. As I said earlier, students are quick to read the signs which cue them in the approved direction. They soon learn to clamor for the right answer: "Aren't you going to tell us what it really means?" The notion of literary texts as dynamic entities that grow or shrink with each rereading, with the reading of other texts, and, in general, with one's growing experiences of life is a notion certainly worth cultivating. As well, students need to learn to live with and value ambiguity rather than to seek and demand fixed and final versions of the literary texts they read.

It is worth recalling here Lakoff and Johnson's Metaphors We Live By (1980) and their discussion of the *problem as puzzle* and *problem in solution* metaphors. I suggest that problems regarded as puzzles have closed answers; once answered, the puzzle no longer intrigues one into another effort at answering it. Problems regarded as being in solution suggest temporary resolution; the problem may precipitate out whenever an appropriate catalyst is introduced. Many classrooms treat the poem as puzzle; once one is done with it, there is nothing left to return to. In contrast, poems treated as problems in solution continually intrigue and involve because their resolution is held in tension; new ideas, new experiences, the passage of time can bring the poem out of solution again.

I have described two constraining expectations which are supported by typical classroom practices: the expectation that a literary work, particularly a poem, will not make sense without the directive intervention of the teacher, and the expectation that literary texts are static, unchanging entities. Such expectations are not easily dislodged. In the first instance, students need to experience success in reading and understanding several poems on their own. In the second instance, they need to come to value postponing closure, not settling too early and easily on meaning.

Readers' Roles in the Making of Meaning

In my research on individual patterns in making sense of poetry (Dias, 1987), I describe a pattern of reading I call *problem-solving*. Readers in this pattern entertain several possibilities of meaning, delay closure, consider their feelings, and do not ignore information from the text that seems to be inconsistent with the meaning they are constructing. Peter, whom I describe as reading in a problem-solving pattern, reported that he was considered disruptive in his English classroom, simply because his initial approach as a reader was to recognize several possibilities of meaning, some of which might be characterized as remote, on the ground that poems do not always mean what they seem to at first glance. When he announced such

possibilities in response to his teacher's questioning, he was told that he should shelve such far-fetched notions and pay more attention to the text. On the other hand, those who read in the paraphrasing pattern I described earlier never felt they were out of line with the teacher's agenda. Seeing their task as mainly one of translating the poem into simpler language, they were able to fit well into a line of questioning whose prime purpose was to establish what the poem stated literally before launching into what it might mean.

We need to ensure that teaching procedures are hospitable to individual ways of making sense and that they do not frustrate ways of reading that allow readers to assume fuller responsibility for the meanings they make.

Demystifying Reading

If we consider our own experience of reading for pleasure, we know that we seldom question the validity of our own reading and understanding. "I have read what I have read!" We respect the rights of critics to differ, and may advert to their opinions without, of course, feeling deflated and inadequate as readers. I believe students who have not yet abandoned reading fiction for themselves do not consider themselves accountable to anyone else for what they read at home. They do not have to read with much of their attention and enjoyment diverted by wondering what a teacher might want them to realize from their reading. When they feel the need, as most readers do, to share their enjoyment or their displeasure, to confirm their observations or their puzzlement, they turn to other readers - not to authorities such as teachers or critics but to fallible readers like themselves. I would argue that this is one, if not the only, reason we lend books; we wish to confirm we are not idiosyncratic in how we read books and, for that matter, how we read the world. *Classroom practice needs to change in ways that reduce and even eliminate the gap between school reading and real world reading.* We may begin by demystifying literature, making it a familiar object, a subject of common parlance, about which one can venture opinions without having prepared an elaborate defense; to which one can pay attention and trust one's intuitions. It should not be long before students recognize that the mere fact that they have shared a reading in common (an assigned text) is an occasion to be taken advantage of - for the richness of opinion it promises - in extended discussion and shared inquiry. Such moves must emanate from the students and their felt need to do so.

Reading Collaboratively

Often in discussions of response to literature, response is referred to in the abstract, with no reference to whether that response has been spoken or written or felt and thought. While we can conceive of a full and satisfying response that remains unarticulated, for all practical purposes we need to consider response as it is expressed in talk or in writing. I wish to press here for the importance of talk in articulating and developing one's response, talk that is tentative, shaping, recursive, and attentive to the responses of others. It is the recursiveness of talk, by which I mean both a forward and backward flow, a recovering and revising of earlier observations, which makes it such a vital instrument for coming to understand one's transaction with a literary work. It is a living through the work again but with the added benefit of other supporting memories to confirm or to reject, to collaboratively recreate the literary work. As well, talk allows for immediate expression of a developing response; it is tolerant of uncertainty and approximation, of detours and diversions; it seems particularly to invite analogy ("It's

like ...," "You know what I mean?") and calling on personal experience ("I remember when ...") in the effort to find a name and a shape for one's experience of that work.

I am thinking of talk in small groups, which as opposed to whole class discussion, multiplies the opportunities for individuals to try out and formulate their ideas. Such an insistence on the value of talk is not to deny the value of writing. There *are* ways of using writing to help students work from their initial responses toward a fuller and more organized statement. But more often than not, I believe, especially for the reluctant readers and writers I have in mind, writing interposes a barrier between a reader's response and his or her articulation of that response. Talk can stay more immediately in touch with one's response, can capture fleeting impressions; it does not censor as much as writing often does or encourage one to come to closure as quickly. The linear sequential nature of writing forces the writer to jettison so much in a response which does not seem immediately relevant and which may not be recalled when it comes to matter. I have compared protocols obtained from individual students asked to think aloud during their efforts to make sense of a poem, with these students' written stream-of-consciousness responses to another poem of a similar level of difficulty. The transcripts of their think-aloud responses average nine pages of double-spaced text, while their written responses are generally fairly short, about a page of handwritten text, despite considerable urging to reread and write on. D.M. Travers' study (1982) of a fourteen-year-old boy responding both orally and in writing to a poem is particularly telling on this point. His oral response shows how without training he is able to "explore most of the aspects of a poem which teachers would hope for, including the demand for evidence to support his views" (p. 57); however, what he is able to write or chooses to write falls far short of representing the fullness of his response to the poem.

Aligning Practice with Theory

In the past several pages I have tried to relate certain key understandings about readers' transactions with literary text to the kinds of classroom practice they point to. I have suggested that some aspects of institutionalized classroom practice are inhospitable to the kinds of teaching that take account of these understandings and the goals they imply. Thus, for instance, the notion of a literary work as an event in time, a dynamic entity continually recreated with each new reading, and varying with each reader and the contexts of that reading, such a notion is utterly denied by teachers who proceed as though their students having all read the same text, have also read the same 'poem' and experienced the poem in more or less the same way. In the following pages I outline a procedure for the teaching of poetry to demonstrate one way in which classroom practice can be consistent with and support a transactional view of literary reading.

Why poetry? For one, it allows me to provide a model that fits conveniently within a typical classroom period. More important, I am aware of a strong degree of antipathy to poetry among many junior school and most high school students and a consequent reluctance among teachers to teach poetry or include more than a token number of poems in their programs. Such attitudes to poetry prevail in schools in most English-speaking countries (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988). It was a question about the source of this antipathy that led me to the approach.

I hypothesized that the source of the antipathy lay in the conviction among most students that they could not make sense of a poem on their own and an accompanying

willingness of teachers to function as guardians of the poem's meaning. What if students were to read poetry with the understanding that they were expected to understand poems for themselves? What if teachers were to shed their roles as final arbiters of the poem's meaning? My intention in following up these questions was to discover the full extent of the students' resources as readers of poetry in the hope that once these were demonstrated, teachers might cease to control and direct students' responses.

With the aim then of finding out the real capabilities of students as readers of poetry, I devised a procedure for small group discussion of poems and for reporting back in a plenary session. Tape recordings of these sessions provided the evidence of what students could do on their own. I shall not detail the results of this experiment (Dias, 1979) except to say that over ten days of reading and discussing poems in this undirected fashion, the students (they were 16-year old comprehensive school students of average ability) demonstrated an unexpectedly high degree of competence as readers of poetry. I also realized that these competencies were not merely latent abilities which had not been exercised and were just waiting to emerge. The process of undirected discussion itself was a means of helping students become autonomous readers. In the search for answers to a question about the real abilities of students as readers of poetry, I had stumbled on an approach that would help students within a period of two weeks develop an enthusiasm for poetry and a confidence in their ability to read and make sense of poems for themselves.

I detail the procedure below as it has been revised over years of using it with classes of varying ability at several grade levels in junior and secondary schools. My account has gained as well from demonstrating the procedure in workshops to hundreds of teachers over the past ten years and from hearing their accounts of their own experiments with the approach (Bryant, 1984; Engbrecht, 1986). Specifically, the procedure recognizes:

- that talk is a valuable means of articulating and developing one's response.
- that collaborative exchange within a small group helps individuals refine and clarify their responses and at once obtain the confirmations they need to develop trust in their intuitions and the relevance of their experience.
- that the teacher ought to withdraw from the forefront of classroom activity and assign students full responsibility for the meanings they make.
- that meaning is a dynamic entity that shifts with newer readings and the contributions of other readers.

Procedures

Students ought to know that they will be involved in a class activity in which they will be expected to read and understand a poem for themselves without direction from the teacher, and that they have among themselves within their groups and as a class the resources to do so. The teacher will provide any help they require without directing them towards one interpretation or another. They will understand that they will work in groups to arrive at an account of their experience of the poem, which they will share with the other groups. The teacher demonstrates the steps listed below, initially with the class as a whole and later with

members in groups, using several short poems so that the procedure becomes familiar and does not distract later from their real task of coming to terms with a poem under discussion.

1. Groups are formed. I have found that six groups of about five students each work best in a class of thirty or so students. Because the procedure makes students very much aware of the value of working in groups, it is quite likely and desirable that small group work become the standard procedure for future classroom activities. As the make-up of the groups will change as students shift to other activities, it does not really matter how the groups are constituted initially - as long as group members are compatible and some effort is made, without drawing attention to it, to keep the groups equally varied in terms of their ability as readers.

2. Each group chooses a reporter, whose responsibility it is to chair the discussion and report back to the large group in the plenary session. Members of the group take turns reporting from one day to the next.

3. The teacher distributes copies of the poem and reads it aloud. Students are invited to ask for the meanings of unfamiliar words and allusions. The teacher provides literal meanings, encouraging the students to determine the specific meaning from the context. The poems, mostly contemporary, should be of sufficient interest and complexity to challenge and justify group effort and sustain discussion.

4. A member of the class reads the poem aloud to the whole class. From this reading the teacher recognizes and clears up likely stumbling points that might cause unnecessary difficulty (e.g., the misreading of particular words or difficulties with unusual syntax or punctuation). If need be, the teacher asks another student to volunteer a reading.

5. Within each group, one member reads the poem aloud.

6. Following this reading, each member of the group *in turn* reports an initial impression: a feeling, an observation, puzzlement, an association. Members of the group are not to react to these initial statements until all of them have spoken. It is important that students come to recognize that they are not expected to have understood the poem even after this third or fourth reading, and that their initial impressions often provide important clues to how the poem speaks to them. At the same time, they can also say that they remain untouched by the poem.

The teacher needs to insist that students register their initial impressions, particularly in the early sessions before they have come to recognize the value of this stage. Speaking without fear of interruption allows individuals to register their impressions without having them dissipate because someone else has presented an articulate and convincing account. Such is often the case in the regular classroom, where confident readers provide explanations that override nagging doubts and often leave uncertain readers wondering why it is their own thinking is so often off the mark. It is not long before such readers learn to shelve their responses and wait for appropriate cues that will direct them to the "right" interpretation.

Because members of the group have all had an opportunity to say something this early in the process, the passage to further contributions has been eased, especially for reticent speakers. Moreover, quite often such contributions are seen to matter in the developing discussion and provide a necessary boost to the confidence of these students. Uncertain readers also take on

decisive roles when it is their turn to report for their group.

7. Having reported their initial impressions, the students are now free to proceed to pick up on these responses or to take a careful look at the poem by reading and discussing it a stanza or several lines at a time. The latter procedure allows them to establish the text of the poem, particularly in light of the various impressions they have heard. It is through this slow rereading of the text that they begin to confirm certain observations and set aside or dismiss others. Their discussion is also driven by the need to prepare a report for the large group.

8. Students are encouraged to reread the poem, particularly when discussion has stalled and also just prior to their assembling their final report, so that last minute insights might be recorded.

9. About twenty minutes into the discussion, the teacher alerts class members that they have another five minutes to get their reports ready. It is an important feature of this procedure that students are not permitted to take notes in preparation for presenting their group report. Such notes often record where they've been rather than where they've arrived. Further, notes may freeze out newer insights; group members may settle too easily for what has already been written and discourage further tampering with meaning. Although students feel insecure at first without notes to guide them, they soon realize that they can function effectively without them. They also recognize that, at least in poetry, one can and should not settle too early on meaning, and that their final reports are open to revision in the light of what other reporters come to say. Because of the injunction that reporters must *build on* what previous reporters have said, it turns out that the reports bear little resemblance to what the group may have rehearsed. Alert to new possibilities of meaning, reporters recall and place as relevant, aspects of the discussion that had not figured in their earlier versions.

10. The groups report in turn, but the order of reporting shifts from day to day so that, over the ten days, any one group has reported first or last only twice. Initially groups are happy to report first, believing the last group will have little to say after the other groups have reported. From the fifth or sixth session on, the groups begin to value hearing other versions of the poem, against which they can set their own account. In building on earlier reports, those reporting can acknowledge common understandings but must attempt to add to the growing account of the poem as well. Reporters are also encouraged to report minority opinions from their groups, as well as to seek help from other members if they have lost track of what they wished to say. The teacher assists such a process after each reporter has spoken by asking other members of the group if they wish to add anything to the report. Often they do.

11. In a fifty-minute class, there are usually five to ten minutes for a final rereading of the poem and a consideration of what new meanings may have emerged in the light of all they have heard. The teacher invites questions and redirects them to groups or individuals who may have addressed those particular questions. *At no time must the teacher function as someone who has the right answers but is unwilling to share them.* I am suggesting that teachers aver a genuine curiosity about the students' responses, so that questions are always deflected back to the students. Not simply in the manner, "Well, what do you think?" but more in the spirit of, "Well, I wondered about that as well. Did some of you discuss this point and have an opinion on it?" Riding crucially on this point is whether the students will finally accept full responsibility for the meanings they make and therefore willingly continue to engage in the kind of effort that makes such taking on of responsibility possible. I can assure teachers that it will not be long

before students begin to resent directive interventions from the teacher, preferring to work things out for themselves. It is at such a stage that I am willing to risk, "Do you want to know what I think?" and confidently expect a disapproving collective "No!"

But the teacher does have a role: one of providing information students need, of urging and encouraging, of generally managing the process. At this stage the teacher has also selected the texts they will read and discuss, though eventually, as their confidence as readers grows, they can be assigned responsibility for negotiating in groups the particular texts they wish the class to study.

One such instance might involve individuals in each group contributing two poems to the group's pool from among the anthologies with which the teacher has flooded the classroom. There is no telling the number of poems an individual might read to settle on just the two which will fit the criteria that the class may have agreed to in advance, be they poems on a theme or from a particular period or author. What is more, each member of the group will now have to consider at least ten poems to decide on the two which now must be presented for inclusion in the class pool. The reading and negotiating involves a comparative valuing of each poem, an exercise in criticism not easily justified in most classrooms. Whether explicitly or implicitly, students are considering what makes a poem worth reading and worth the collective inquiring of a group. But the teacher is not excluded from responding to the poem. Students also keep a daily journal, in which they write their response to a later rereading of the poem they have discussed during the day. Their understanding, one promoting the notion of a poem as an event in time, is that their response may have altered in the light of the discussion and with the passage of time and the other experiences and associations that have impinged on their consciousness since discussions's end. The teacher can now respond as another reader, sharing, confirming, being informed, and quite often pushing class members to reexamine and reflect. The one right answer is no longer an issue.

I have set out the details of this procedure in order to illustrate the careful defining of roles and tasks necessary to promote teaching and learning consistent with our knowledge of the responding process and the kinds of relationships that promote authentic responses and authorize readers. While I have listed steps, their delineation is largely arbitrary, only a means of keeping activities in sequence. Much also depends on the students' familiarity with group process and their attitudes to poetry. I have worked generally with classes considered hostile or at least indifferent to poetry and not used to participating in groups. My experience is that these procedures are effective in a variety of situations and with other genres of literature as well. When they are not, most likely they have been used mechanically and/or are incongruent with the attitudes to literature and literary study promoted by the teacher and the institution.

I will illustrate these procedures by examining extracts from the discussions of one class. The students are 13-year-olds of average to above-average ability in a large comprehensive secondary school in Montreal attended largely by children of first-generation Italian immigrants. The students had been discussing poetry in the manner I have described over ten days with their regular teacher in charge. I conducted the session under conditions not so congenial to easy and unrestrained discussion: a large room, video-cameras, lights, tape-recorders and microphones at each table, and the presence of four unfamiliar adults. (Some teachers, who probably subscribe to the pressure-cooker theory of accomplishment, have discounted the performance of these students as somehow enhanced by these adverse conditions.) The poem I had chosen was Ted Hughes' "The Thought-Fox", a poem I consider challenging and difficult,

particularly for 13-year-olds. Several hundred teachers with whom I have shared this discussion agree it is a fairly complex poem and normally one they would not consider assigning to 13-year-old readers. On the other hand, its very difficulty instigates and justifies a concerted collaborative effort after meaning. The discussion that follows represents a high level of achievement, which to my mind directly resulted from the students' involvement in undirected discussion of poetry over the previous ten days.

The Discussion

There are six groups of five to six students in the classroom. The students have heard the poem read three times. One of them has asked for and been given the literal meaning of 'lags' (l. 15). What follows is an abridged version of the discussion, sampling students' talk in various groups and their progress through the poem with just those segments that illustrate the process and the quality of the effort towards meaning.

Group A's initial comments focus on what happened to the fox in the end, mainly questioning several puzzling aspects of the poem.

Sandra: You guys, what do you think happened at the end? That's what I'm wondering .... Did anybody else think that the fox died at the end? 'Cause you know the way he ends it, it's sort of dramatic, you know: "The window is starless still; the clock ticks,/ The page is printed." You know?

Lina: But it says, "Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox ..." What does that mean? "Hot stink?"

Rose: But it says it enters the dark hole of the head ... what does that mean?

In Group C, Toni's initial comments are worth noting:

Toni: When I read this poem, I thought about ... OK, let's say you're writing a composition, you're stumped, you don't know what to write about. So maybe he's doing his homework and he doesn't know what to write about, so he imagines it .... Maybe he looks out through the window, through his window, and he imagines the fox. And he imagines all these things. And he writes ... the page. That's what I think.

Toni draws on an experience they can all relate to in order to explain what might be happening in the poem. When we look at Group D, they have already shared their initial impressions and are now looking more closely at the poem, wondering what's going on:

Diane: Is he thinking about the fox or is he really seeing?

Joanne: I think he's thinking.... The first line gives you a hint. It's "The Thought-Fox" - thought about the fox.

Gina: He's imagining like the ...

Barbara: He sees the two eyes ... I think; because "across clearings an eye." But in the fifth stanza: "A widening, deepening greenness" - maybe the eyes of the fox were green.

Joanne: I guess they were brilliant.

Diane: And like they were nice ....

Barbara: "Coming about its own business".

Diane: Just walking around.

Joanne: Yeah, searching for food.

Diane: It's not bothering anyone.

Gina: And, like, it's quiet.

Diane: He's minding his own business.

Joanne: And the fox is probably going into a cave or something.

Gina: "And enters the dark hole of the head."

Barbara: The head might be the cave.

Diane: But then it says, "The page is printed."

What is interesting here is the constant attendance to the text in the effort to establish what is happening. Diane's question is central: Is he thinking about the fox or is he really seeing? As they pick up on that question, they remain in touch with what they themselves imagine. But then Diane wonders what this all has to do with "The page is printed."

Group E is going through the stage of establishing the text of the poem.

Pat: But then "something more near ..."

Paula: The fox, "though deeper within darkness ..."

Nadia: And he also can see no stars because it's winter. Like he says about the snow, and in winter there's no stars.

Phil: Well, in the winter there could be some stars ...

Nadia: But they're rare. Very rare, You don't usually see ...

Paula: But here, this might mean something: "Across clearings, an eye ..."

Nadia: He's imagining the deepening greenness of the eye ... coming about its own business.

Pat: Could this mean something: "Sets neat prints into the snow ..."? Like he's talking, like in the fourth stanza ...

Nadia: Like he's writing it down; he's setting the story down: "Sets neat prints into the snow" ...

Paula: Like the fox and him writing it down. Like he's thinking of the fox making prints in the snow and him, he's printing ...

What one might note about this segment is how members of the group pick up from one another and confirm, differ, or elaborate. Also interesting is their alertness to the possibilities of meaning: "Could this mean something?" When we return to Group C, we notice that they also are reading sections of the poem and talking about them:

Anthony: He's always moving around, seeing what's happening.

Debbie: I agree with Anthony because ... ah, and "now, and now, and now," like he was probably thinking what he was going to say next. He's continuing with the plot of his poem. I agree with Anthony.

Marilyn: Because he's imagining these things.

Raphael: (reading) "Sets neat prints into the snow,/ Between trees, and warily a lame/ Shadow lags by stump and in hollow/ Of a body that is bold to come ..." In this stanza I think he's still imagining about the fox; he's trying to write about it; he's trying to put a picture of the fox inside his mind. So he's seeing it go between trees; it's probably looking for food; and he sees the shadow.

Debbie: He's comparing what he's like with like what a fox would be like...

Marilyn: I think, ah OK, the fox is walking, all right? And it's following close to him, so close you can imagine, so close that you could smell the fox.

Debbie: So he's imagining it, and he feels it coming towards him.

Marilyn: And then it enters the dark hole of the head.

Debbie: So that he's entering his head is the imagery.

Anthony: It's not really that; maybe it's a figure of speech or something else but it can't be that ... he's thinking ... maybe a skunk stinking or something, but not a fox. Maybe it's ... an expression.

Marilyn: I think you could smell something coming except for a cat.

Debbie: You don't smell my cat!

Marilyn: You could smell it coming; you could see it coming ... like he's probably saying it that way. Like he's saying it's coming but he's putting it in these kind of words. Like he's saying "with a hot stink of [the] fox," it's saying it's coming ...

I have chosen this segment because it particularly illustrates an essential aspect of the collaborative process: the merging of closely parallel individual commentaries so that one takes on aspects of the other. Note Debbie's moving in tandem, first with a key comment on Raphael's reading, equating the fox's movement with the movement of the poet's mind, and then with her accompaniment to Marilyn's observations. We note also Anthony has somehow come to terms with accommodating "smell of the fox" with his belief that foxes don't "stink," and allowing that it might be "a figure of speech or something," an explanation which for him probably allows for all sorts of inaccuracies in poetry.

As we move forward to the close of the discussion, about twenty-five minutes since the first reading, we find Group D planning what their reporter might say.

Barbara: "It enters the dark hole of the head ..." probably means he's going into a cave.

Joanne: (rehearsing Diane, who will be reporting for the group) And don't forget to say that we think it's good that the poet is remaining himself.

Diane: This poem is comparing the poet to himself ...

Joanne: Say it over ... all in your own words.

Diane: OK, the title of this poem, "The Thought-Fox" is a very good title because it suits the poem very much, because ...

Quiet casually, Diane puts forward a complex recognition: the poem represents the poet's own process of creation. The poet is like the fox, but yet 'remains himself.'

While an abbreviated run-through of the discussion phase can never fully represent the concertedness of the inquiring, the attention to text, the overall tentativeness, the high level of collaboration and involvement that occurs across several real-life discussions, it does illustrate the active questioning and meaning-making in which the students engaged. What follows reproduces most of the reporting back phase. One must recall that the reporters are speaking extemporaneously, with the assurance that other members of the group can pitch in when needed. One should look particularly for evidence that reporters are taking account of the reports of previous reporters, that there is a cumulative building up of meaning.

Reporting Back

Slightly diffident, because she has to report first, Lina speaks for Group A.

Lina: OK, my group thought there was this poet, and he's getting ready to write a

poem. He has this blank page in front of him, and, ah .. and he has a pen in his hand, because it says, "And this blank page where my fingers move." So he's starting to write. And he has, there's a window near him and he sees outside this window. And it's all dark because it's midnight. And outside he sees a, it's a forest, and he sees a fox and like it's nervous; and it's in the night. And he's going through forest and, it's um ... While it's walking, there's another shadow in the night and it's like, tired. This shadow's a hunter because ...

He's walking halfway through the forest; and then it says, "Across the clearing, an eye/ A widening deepening greenness." We think that he sees the fox and he's interested. You know, he's a hunter and he wants to kill him. So near the end, like, he shoots the fox and the bullet enters the hole, the bullet enters the head ...

And in the end the poet wrote his poem because he wrote what he saw. The poem doesn't rhyme and ... that's about it. Oh, we didn't know at the beginning whether the poet was imagining this or he saw it for real because the title is "The Thought-Fox," and it could be that he's imagining. And the first line says, "I imagine this midnight moment's forest" ...

Group A has established that someone is writing a poem. The fox is the subject of the poem; "enters the head" and "a lame shadow" have suggested 'bullet' and 'hunter' respectively. Quite likely, an expectation that the teacher values technical information makes the reporter throw in the gratuitous, "The poem doesn't rhyme." The procedure allows students to report their uncertainties as well, so that they do not feel obliged to stake out and defend positions that may or may not be tenable. Group B's report follows immediately.

Albert: We thought that this poem is about a man; he's writing a poem and he feels like his surroundings are dead. He sees the dark forest and the clock is just ticking. And he feels ... there's something else was alive near him. So he looks through the window and he sees a fox. Like, minding his business; like, it was in the dark - he felt the fox was so confident walking. And like, the man if he would be there, it would be like startled. And so the fox is walking, and then [in] the shadow he sees something bold. So like, the fox even though he's in that circumstance that there's a shadow, he's still like concentrating, unlike the man who can't. ... And as the man is seeing this, he writes the poem. It's like an experience for him. It's everything is dead, and suddenly he sees this fox in a shadow. And he sees how the fox manages to do things in the dark. So, as he sees the fox, he does it himself. At the end, before he knew it, the poem was finished ....

And, ah, there's a, it's a comparison. He's comparing himself writing the poem to the fox escaping the hunter. There's a simile in the third stanza: "Cold, delicately as the dark snow." This setting is in the winter ....

We think it's a uh ... we thought it was like a man in the country, but then a couple of guys in the group were disagreeing, and they said that it's a man in the city because he saw through the window and he didn't see any stars; and in the city you can't see stars because there's too much light.

Michael: (another member of the group supplements the report) - In the first line of the stanza, it says, "I imagine this midnight moment's forest"; after that stanza, I think he imagines the whole poem. He's letting his imagination run loose. And after that, he wrote a poem about it.

This report moves from an awareness of the bleak mood of the poem/poet (darkness, dead surroundings, the clock just ticking) to contrasting the uncertainty of the writer with the confident movement of the fox. Again, this reporter believes it is necessary to establish group members' technical credentials: there's a comparison, a simile, and a winter setting. He also reports their disagreement about the where the poem is actually set. Michael's contribution to the report points to the group's awareness of the poem's structure, an awareness that is more fully developed in Group C's report below.

Anthony: There's this poet who's trying to find a topic to write about, and too, he tried to look out of his window to see if there's something of a start that could start his thinking. There's nothing. So then he thinks about a fox and a hunter. He tries to put it in words; he's thinking about it, and as he is thinking, he doesn't know, but he's writing about the fox trying to avoid the hunter. And finally the hunter gets him. And we also found that in the first paragraph the last sentence has a period. That was a ... we thought that paragraph was in the present. Then all of a sudden in the next four paragraphs there's no periods, and that we thought that was only imagination, until the last paragraph, the second stanza, where is the period .... Then after that "the window is starless still, the clock ticks, the page is printed." After the period, he goes back to the present like in the beginning. We thought that he was comparing himself, that he was looking for something to write about, and he finally gets the fox.

Debbie: (adds) The group said that this person must have been very creative, because at the beginning he had nothing to write about, but as time went by, he made up a poem; he didn't even [know?] what he was doing. Like, he was imagining but he wasn't; ... he didn't even notice he was really writing the poem. I also think that maybe, at the beginning, because the poet is stumped, because he didn't know what to write about; maybe he was nervous because he had a deadline to meet, and after when he looked out the window and everything was calm, then everything came to him.

Marilyn: (adds) The sentence on the last stanza, first one [sentence], it says, "Till, with the sudden sharp hot stink of fox/ It enters the dark hole of the head." I think it means that the fox is coming closer and closer towards him, and when it says "the hot stink of fox," it's like he's smelling it. But it's not that ... Instead of saying, "The fox is coming," it's more creative to say "the hot stink of fox." It's more better ...

It shows that he's saying the fox is coming closer ... it's a figure of speech.

What is noticeable about this report is Anthony's linking the scheme of the poem's meaning with the structure of the poem. The earlier reports have allowed the reporter to skim

through the larger outline of the poem to concentrate on finer details. Other members of the group now seem to feel freer to supplement the report, again to draw attention to and clarify key details. Marilyn, for instance, picks up on her concern in the earlier group discussion to deal with the problematical "hot stink of fox" image. Again, like earlier reporters, she seems to believe that finding a school-valued label ("it's a figure of speech") for what she is trying to understand must matter in some way.

As we look at the contribution of Group D below, we might ask if they can possibly make some observations that earlier groups haven't reported.

Diane: The title, "The Thought-Fox," we thought it was a good title for the poem because the poet is imagining that he's seeing the fox; he's really imagining. And while he's sitting down - we think he's sitting down at his typewriter - and, uh, he's trying what he's going to write about. And then he starts imagining the fox and the forest, the darkness, and it's so dark and lonely ... He's lonely; he's very lonely. He's just sitting there and then all of a sudden, he starts imagining these things. And then at the end, he's ... the page is printed ... it means like all of a sudden, he stops imagining, comes out of his imagination, and the page is printed. Everything is done. And, oh, yeah, the poet of the poem is comparing the poet to the fox. Because the fox was lonely in the forest - he had nobody with him - and the poet neither had anybody with him because he's sitting down all by himself. And it's so dark and lonely he's just sitting ...[??] The last stanza, second line, "It enters the dark hole of the head," we think it means that the fox, he's entering the cave and that's where the poet's imagination stops.

Gina: (adds) When it says, "Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox," like, the smell of the fox [is] what the poet is thinking of to write, like, his ideas ...

Diane: The poet is saying the story, "I imagine the [this] midnight moment's forest," so he's saying the poem and he was thinking about it. ... he looks through the window and he sees no stars, that it's so dark, he sees nothing; so he imagines the imagery of the fox.

Group D's report again falls into the pattern of a cumulative building up of meaning. Diane relates the title to what occurs in the poem. Her account of the poem is closely interwoven with what she feels and senses: "it's so dark and lonely," "he's lonely; he's very lonely," "just sitting there," "all of a sudden." She also makes a nice distinction, "the poet of the poem [Hughes]" as opposed to the poet in the poem. Gina adds a further gloss to what had intrigued earlier groups, equating the smell of the fox with the poet's thoughts. Diane answers the question she raised earlier in her own group: "Is he thinking about the fox, or is he really seeing?" It is too dark for the poet to have seen anything; so he must have imagined "the imagery of the fox." What seems to be apparent here and in Group E's report that follows is an increasingly confident sense of the poem's integral meaning and form.

Nadia: The whole ... what he's writing in the poem, he's imagining it for sure. We know, the title tells us - The Thought-Fox - like, he's thinking of a fox; and the first line, "I imagine this midnight moment's forest: ..." There's also the colon; so he starts imagining what he imagines. And he's saying the story; he's writing down his story he's saying .... We think that the fox is the author 'cause where he

said, "Cold, delicately as the dark snow," it could be cold like a vague thoughts. Like, at the beginning he had very vague thoughts like about what to write about. We know it's been thought up, 'cause usually when you just for reality, when you just ... you don't really count the fox's steps, but he did. Like, when he goes: "Two eyes ... And again now, and now, and now/ Set neat prints into the snow," so he's like counting. He's kind of saying how many times he set the prints into the snow, the fox, and those prints we think he's saying of himself; he's printing the poem. ... As the fox is [moving] (??), he is writing or he is thinking of him. We see, uh, dynamism [hesitantly] of character. Like a story, like, at the beginning they go through obstacles and then they overcome their obstacles, and at the end, like, they've overcome them. The speaker in the poem, he overcame his obstacles, and then he wrote the poem.

[Nadia's reporting has been interrupted by several fits of coughing. She seems to have trouble speaking; so the teacher uses this opportunity to suggest that they should come back later to some of the interesting points her group has raised. BUT ...]

Nadia: I am still not finished. So then the first and last stanza, they're opposites. 'Cause at the end, the clock's loneliness, and at the end it's ticking; and here the blank page and at the end it's printed; so it's the opposite. "Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox," like, he imagined it and it's like the thought is going away, but the smell is still staying, like, the thoughts are still in the air. And when it enters the dark hole, like the thoughts are still in his head and he's writing them down. The window is starless at the beginning, and it is also starless at the end. That's the reality. It was always starless. No matter what he thought, the window was always starless. And we also know that he imagined it where it says "an eye,/ A widening deepening greenness,/ Brilliantly, concentratedly," like usually in the darkness, you don't see the fox's eye very clearly. So he's imagining, the eye, a widening, deepening greenness, and it's also him that ... it's his eyes deepening "coming about his own business" of writing the poem. And here "Between trees, and warily a lame/ Shadow lags by stump and in hollow/ Of a body that is bold to come" - that's the obstacle. He's very weak at the beginning of the poem; he doesn't know what to write. But later, it's "of a body that is bold to come." He knows that he's thought of this, and his writing will be stronger. Like, he's gonna write down what he thought of.

Nadia's report is undeniably fuller and more articulate than the earlier reports; however, its debt to the earlier reports is clear. Nadia builds on a firmer base of what had so far been advanced tentatively. She is in a position to argue with some sureness how several aspects of the poem might fit in: the title, the structure, the author/fox identity enhanced by her association of 'snow' and 'cold' with vague thoughts, and later the brilliant, concentrated realization of the poem, her association of footprints in the snow with printing the poem. Again, like others, she makes a customary bow to teacher concerns by speaking of "dynamism of character," a term she has borrowed from teacher discussions of characterization in short stories. What is brilliant about Nadia's or the group's apprehension of the poem (it is hard to say what is now being realized on the instant) is the fleshing out of the parallels between the poet's realization of the poem and the wary, lagging movement of the fox and its growing sureness in "coming about its own business."

I should also comment about my interruption half-way through Nadia's reporting. I had interviewed Nadia earlier that morning, collecting data for the larger project of which this discussion is a part. That interview had been interrupted by several fits of coughing. At the first sign of a recurrence of her cough in this session, I broke in because I knew further talk would exacerbate her coughing; I was also painfully aware of the camera focused intently on her face. I am struck therefore by Nadia's insistence on going on. She knew she was not finished, and that if she did not continue to speak, she would not have found expression for (and therefore come to know) the powerful ideas impinging on her consciousness. It is likely that others might have picked up on her report and carried on. I doubt they would, simply because Nadia's thoughts had gathered a kind of momentum that often in our best moments inspires a rush of perceiving and connecting. The notions she advances following the interruption clearly justify her insistence on continuing to speak, particularly her working out the differences between the settings at the start and the ending of the poem.

It is also important to note that the other students are traveling alongside rather than being left behind by her report. Their small group discussions and the reports of each group have primed them for the recognitions Nadia advances. I make this reference to traveling because I have in mind Douglas Barnes' (1976) notion of students in most classrooms arriving at destinations without having traveled. It is the teacher, who like an overly conscientious tour guide, has done the traveling for them.

When we consider the whole reporting-back sequence, what stands out is the developing account of the poem. Each report gets longer, the confirmations come through, new recognitions emerge. For me, the proof of the effectiveness of this procedure does not lie in Nadia's articulate account, an account made possible because of the groundwork clearly apparent in the earlier reports. It seems necessary that Group A brings clearly to light possible understandings that do not appear to hold under further discussion. All earlier reports have steadily built up a sense of what is actually going on in the poem and have thus afforded Nadia the opportunity to make the finer discriminations. I would venture to say that Group E might not have reported in this manner if they had spoken earlier in this sequence; there was just too much to be got out of the way.

I had said earlier in describing the procedure that groups initially would not relish reporting last. It turned out that over the ten days, those reporting last had learned to attend to the reports of other groups and exploit their particular advantage. As an aside, I might point out that those who advocate the specific teaching of 'listening skills' should look to such naturalistic learning situations for instruction. Readers may also have noticed how the reporter speaks for the group: *we felt, the group felt*. There is also a clear sense that the class as a whole is defining its own agenda. In fact, the least productive parts of the reporting occur where students feel the need to attend to a teacherish agenda, a concern for technical know-how. The kind of technical know-how that does matter is organic with their account of what is happening in the poem. I have in mind their reporting on how the formal structure of the poem parallels the account of the poem's "events." I should also point out that through all these reports, we see that the groups have appropriated the text; it is embedded in their thinking and talking about the poem. Readers may have also noticed how the procedure enables and motivates talk, talk as the seedbed (to borrow James Britton's use of the word) of reflective thought. But talk here is not only a means but a clearly desirable product, as the extemporaneous reports of these 13-year-olds show.

Conclusions

This discussion of the "The Thought-Fox" was meant to demonstrate that maintaining a high degree of congruence between our understandings of the process of literary reading and classroom practice can actually be quite productive. The procedure described respects the transactional nature of literary reading, the notion of the "poem" as evoked, an event in time. It also respects the individuality of readers and affords them opportunity to negotiate their own understandings. It allows the teacher to shed the mantle of the expert, the role of final mediator between the reader and the text, a role which I believe is the most powerful inhibitor of students' taking ownership of their own reading and thereby becoming more responsive and responsible readers.

There are other criteria, other recognitions to keep in mind, and these are listed because they should enable teachers to extend the procedure to other genres, to adapt the procedure to elementary level readers of literature as well as to post-secondary students, and to experiment with applications outside the study of literature:

- classrooms must be organized in ways that allow students to trust and rely on their own resources as readers.

- working in small groups allows students to test their initial responses, take account of the responses of others, and recognize the several possibilities of meaning a work affords. As well, the teacher no longer occupies the center.

- personal experiences evoked by the text are more likely to be shared within the secure confines of the small group.

- classroom procedures ought to allow students to live with and become tolerant of ambiguity, a condition of meaning that allows further exploration and rereading.

- familiarization in itself is a major step towards understanding, enjoyment, and discrimination in the reading of poetry (Britton, 1954; Harding, 1968). Poetry ought to become and be treated as a familiar object.

- collaborative exchange within and among groups stimulates exploration, responsible reading, and a genuine curiosity about the interpretations of other groups.

- tasks assigned for group work ought to be presented in ways which make collaborative exchange the most productive way of achieving their ends. Tasks should in and of themselves invite collaboration. (I am suggesting here that tasks that can be achieved just as well by individual effort do not usually justify the time and effort given to working in groups and inevitably fail as collaborative tasks.)

I have used the procedure successfully with eleven-year-olds and with college-level students; and have had enthusiastic reports from teachers who have adapted the procedure in reading and discussing stories and poems with even younger children. If students have been won over to the process with poetry, they are eager to read novels in the same way; however, what they need to negotiate in their groups and report on will depend on the particular novel and how it has been segmented for discussion.

I have said little here about writing. My experience is that talk in small group discussion and the reporting back helps develop articulateness in writing as well. As students come to be more in touch with their own thinking about what they have read, they find fuller expression for it. But until students have developed greater autonomy as readers, writing ought to remain secondary and incidental to the collaborative exchange of small groups.

A major concern remains, and it has to do with the role of teacher as evaluator. Teachers ought to find ways to make assessment a collaborative enterprise in a partnership among teacher, the group, and the individual student. Teachers must also be aware that while classroom procedures might assign power and authority to student readers, our role as evaluators of their performance can, in effect, subvert the very autonomy we wish to promote -- ultimately, most of our evaluation practices assert that we still remain in charge of their reading. I would also be alert to maintaining a consistency in attitude and practice across the variety of literary reading activities that go on in any classroom. Teachers cannot flit in and out of roles, assuming at one time a stance that authorizes readers and asserting an authoritative guardianship at another. While there is no middle road, one can be assured that as student readers take on a fuller responsibility for the meanings they make, they will be less likely to surrender their rights as readers to speak and write from their own responses. Such gains will be consolidated if and as we shift the focus of assessment from final products to the processes students are engaged in both as individual readers and as readers in groups. Above all, we need to ensure both by policy and in practice that readers are not once more relegated to the sidelines, denying the validity of their own readings and wondering how they might approximate teacher-authorized versions.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on research funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (grant no. 410-86-0237). I am deeply grateful to Mrs. Linda Fernandes and her Secondary 2 class at St. Pius X Comprehensive High School, Montreal. For their valuable feedback and editorial advice, I must thank my colleagues Ann Beer and Anthony Pare as well as the two anonymous assessors of this paper.

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